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PATAPHYSICS OF YEAR 2000

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A tormenting thought: as of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction.

Elias Canetti (1978:69)

There are diverse plausible hypotheses with respect to this vanishing or disappearance of history. Canetti's expression that "all mankind suddenly left reality" compellingly invokes the speed of liberation a body would require to escape the gravitational pull of a star or a planet. Following this imagery, we could suppose that the acceleration of technology-, event- and media- driven modernity, as well as the speed of other economic, political and sexual exchanges have set loose a tempo of liberation whereby we have become removed from the sphere of reference to the real, to history. We have been "liberated" in every sense of the term, so much so that we have moved beyond a certain space-time, we've left a certain horizon where the real was possible because gravitation was still strong enough for things to reflect on themselves and thereby possess or acquire some sort of duration (*duree*) and outcome.

A certain type of slowness or deliberation (i.e. a certain speed, but not too much), a certain distance, yet not too much, a certain liberation (the energy of rupture and change), but not too much - all these are necessary for this condensation, for the signifying crystallization of events to take place, one that we call history - this type of coherent unfolding of causes and effects we call the real.

Outside of this gravitational pull which keeps bodies in orbit, all the atoms of meaning lose themselves or self-absolve in space. Every single atom follows its own trajectory towards infinity and dissolves in space. This is precisely what we are living in our present societies occupied with the acceleration of all bodies, all messages, all processes in all possible senses and wherein, via modern media, each event, each narrative, each image gets endowed with the simulation of an infinite trajectory. Every political, historical, cultural fact is invested with a kinetic energy which spreads over its own space and thrusts these facts into a hyperspace where they lose all meaning by way of an inability to attain their meaning. It is useless to turn to science-fiction: from this point on, from the here and now, through our computer science, our circuits and our channels, this particle accelerator has definitively disrupted and broken the referential orbit of things.

With respect to history, the narrative has become impossible since by definition it is the potential re-narrativization of a sequence of meaning. Through the impulse of total diffusion and circulation each event is liberated for itself only - each event becomes atomized and nuclear as it follows its trajectory into the void. In order to diffuse itself *ad infinitum*, it has to be fragmented like a particle. This is the way it attains a speed of no-return, distancing it from history once and for all. Every cultural, eventual group needs to be fragmented, disarticulated to allow for its entry into the circuits, each language must be absolved into a binary mechanism or device to allow for its circulation to take place - not in our memory, but in the electronic and luminous memory of the computers. There is no human language or speech (*langage*) that could compete with the speed of light. There is no event that could withstand its own diffusion across the planet. No meaning

stands a chance once offered the means of its own acceleration. There is no history that will resist the centrifugal pull of facts or its short-circuiting in real time (in the same order of ideas: no sexuality will resist its own liberation, not a single culture will foreclose its own advancement, no truth will defy its own verification, etc.).

Even theory is no longer in the state of "reflecting" on anything anymore. All it can do is to snatch concepts from their critical zone of reference and transpose them to the point of no return, in the process of which theory itself too, passes into the hyperspace of simulation as it loses all "objective" validity, while it makes significant gains by acquiring real affinity with the current system.

The second hypothesis, with respect to the vanishing of history, is the opposite of the first, i.e., it pertains not to the acceleration but to the slowing down of processes. This too is derived directly from physics.

Matter slows the passage of time. More precisely, time seems to pass very slowly upon the surface of a very dense body of matter. The phenomenon increases in proportion to growth in density. The effect of this slowing down (*ralentissement*) will raise the wavelength of light emitted by this body in a way that will allow the observer to record this phenomenon. Beyond a certain limit, time stops, the length of the wave becomes infinite. The wave no longer exists. Light extinguishes itself.

The analogy is apparent in the way history slows down as it brushes up against the astral body of the "silent majorities". Our societies are governed by this process of the mass, and not only in the sociological or demographical sense of the word, but also in the sense of a "critical mass", of going beyond a certain point of no-return. That is where the crucially significant event of these societies is to be found: the advent of their revolutionary process along the lines of their mobility, (they are all revolutionary with respect to the centuries gone by), of their equivalent force of inertia, of an immense indifference, and of the silent power of this indifference. This inert matter of the social is not due to a lack of exchanges, of information or of communication; on the contrary, it is the result of the multiplication and saturation of exchanges. It is borne of the hyperdensity of cities, of merchandise, messages and circuits. It is the cold star of the social, a mass at the peripheries of which history cools out. Successive events attain their annihilation in indifference. Neutralized and bullet-sprayed by information, the masses neutralise history retrospect and act as a screen of absorption. They themselves have no history, no meaning, no conscience, no desire. They are potential residues of all history, of all meaning, of all desire. By inserting themselves into modernity, all these wonderful things managed to invoke a mysterious counterpart, the misappreciation of which has unleashed all current political and social strategies.

This time, it's the opposite: history, meaning, progress are no longer able to find their speed or tempo of liberation. They can no longer pull themselves out of this much too dense body which slows down their trajectory, slows down their time to the point from whereon perception and imagination of the future escapes us. All social, historical and temporal transcendence is absorbed via this mass's silent immanence. Already, political events no longer conduct sufficient autonomous energy to rouse us and can only run their course as a silent movie in front of which we all sit collectively irresponsible. That is where history reaches its end, not because of the lack of actors or participants, not due to a lack of violence (with respect to violence, there is always an increasing amount), not due to a lack of events (as for events, there will always be more of them thanks to the role of the media and information!) - but because of a slowing down or deceleration, because of indifference and stupefaction. History can no longer go beyond itself, it can no longer envisage its own finality or dream of its own end, it shrouds or buries itself in its immediate effect, it self-exhausts in special effects, it implodes in current events.

Essentially, one can no longer speak of the end of history since it has no time to rejoin its own end. As its effects accelerate, its meaning inexorably decelerates. It will end up stopping and extinguishing itself like light and time at the peripheries of an infinitely dense mass...

Humanity too, had its big-bang: a certain critical density, a certain concentration of people and exchanges that compel this explosion we call *history* and which is none other than the dispersal of dense and hieratic cores of earlier civilizations. Today, we are living an effect of reversal: we have overstepped the threshold of critical mass with respect to populations, events, information, control of the inverse process of inertia of history and politics. At the cosmic level of things, we don't know anymore whether we have reached this speed of liberation wherein we would be partaking of a permanent or final expansion (this, no doubt, will remain forever uncertain). At the human level, where prospects are more limited, it is possible that the energy itself employed for the liberation of the species (acceleration of birthrates, of techniques and exchanges in the course of the centuries) have contributed to an excess of mass and resistance that bear on the initial energy as it drags us along a ruthless movement of contraction and inertia.

Whether the universe infinitely expands or retracts to an infinitely dense and infinitely small core will hinge upon its critical mass (with respect to which speculation itself is infinite in view of the discovery of newer particles). Following the analogy, whether our human history will be evolutionary or involuted will presumably depend upon the critical mass of humanity. Are we to see ourselves, like the galaxies, on a definitive orbit that distances us from each other under the impact of a tremendous speed, or is this dispersal to infinity itself destined to reach an end, and the human molecules bound to draw closer to each other by way of an inverse effect of gravitation? The question is whether a human mass that grows day by day is able to control a pulsation of this genre?

Third hypothesis, third analogy. But we are still dealing with a point of disappearance, a point of evanescence, *avanishing-point*, this time however along the lines of music. This is what I call the stereophonic effect. We are all obsessed with high fidelity, with the quality of musical "transmission" (*rendu*). On the console of our channels, equipped with our tuners, our amplifiers and our baffles, we mix, regulate and multiply soundtracks in search of an infallible or unerring music. Is this, though, still music? Where is the threshold of high fidelity beyond the point of which music as such would disappear? Disappearance would not be due to the lack of music, it would disappear for having stepped beyond this boundary, it would disappear into the perfection of its materiality, into its own special effect. Beyond this point, neither judgement nor aesthetic pleasure could be found anymore. Ecstasy of musicality procures its own end.

The disappearance of history is of the same order: there too, we have gone beyond this limit or boundary where, subjected to *factual* and *information-al* sophistication, history as such ceases to exist. Large doses of immediate diffusion, of special effects, of secondary effects, of fading - and this famous Larsen effect produced in acoustics by an excessive proximity between source and receiver, in history via an excessive proximity, and therefore the disastrous interference of an event with its diffusion - create a short-circuit between cause and effect, similarly to what takes place between the object and the experimenting subject in microphysics (and in the human sciences!). All things entailing a certain radical uncertainty of the event, like excessive high fidelity, lead to a radical uncertainty with respect to music. Elias Canetti says it well: "as of a certain point", nothing is true anymore. This is also why the soft music of history escapes us, it disappears under the microscope or into the stereophony of information.

At the heart of information one finds history haunted by its own disappearance. At the hub of hi-fi, music is haunted by its disappearance. At the core of experimentation, science is haunted by the disappearance of its object. Pivotal to pornography is a

sexuality haunted by its own disappearance. Everywhere it is the same stereophonic effect, the absolute proximity of the real: the same effect of simulation.

This side of the *vanishing-point* - where *there was still* history, *there was still* music - remains irreparable. Where should one stop the perfecting of the stereo? Its bounds or limits are constantly pushed back or forced to retreat in the face of technical obsessions. Where should information stop? Confronted with such a fascination with "real time", with high fidelity, one can only resort to moral objections, and that does not carry much meaning/weight.

Once one has passed beyond this point, the process becomes irreversible, contrary to the hope Canetti seems to foster. We will no longer be able to find the music that had been before the stereo (if not by way of an effect that draws upon a supplementary technique of simulation), we will not be able to find the history that had been before information and the media. The original essence of music, the original concept of history have disappeared, since we can no longer isolate them from their models of perfection, which are also their models of simulation, of their forced absorption into a hyperreality that effaces them. We will no longer be able to know, ever, what the social and music had been before they exacerbated themselves in their useless perfection of today. We will never again know what history had been before its aggravation in the technical perfection of information - we will never again find out things as they were before their dissipation in the fulfilment of their model.

Suddenly, the situation becomes original again. The possibility to move out of history in order to enter into simulation is but the consequence of the fact that, basically, history itself was none other than an immense model of simulation. Not in the sense that its existence would have only amounted to the narrative or interpretation we supplied it with, but with respect to the time in which it took place, this linear time which is also the time of the end and of an unlimited suspense of the end. This is the only time wherein history could take place, in other words, within the succession of non-insane facts which engender cause and effect, without any appeal to absolute necessity and maintained in a disequilibrium regarding the future. So much different from the societies of ritual where all things attain their completion in an origin and where the ceremony retraces the perfection of this original event. In opposition to this order of *accomplished* (fulfilled) time, liberation of the "real" time of history, production of a linear and differential time may appear as a purely artificial process. Where does this suspense, where does this "what has to take place will take place at the end of time" come from (Judgement Day, salvation or catastrophe), and with respect to which sights are set on an expiry date or day of reckoning that does not lend itself to calculation, quasi remains incalculable? This model of linearity must have seemed perfectly fictional, completely absurd and immaterial in the eyes of cultures that had no idea of a differential "maturity date", of a successive sequence of things and of a finality. A scenario which would have otherwise been seen as invoking evil. The very first Christian movements were characterized by a vehement resistance against any attempt to put off the advent of the Kingdom of God. The endorsement of such an "historical" perspective on salvation, of its non-fulfilment in immediacy, did not go without violence, and all heresies have constantly reclaimed this leitmotif of the fulfilment of the promise in immediacy. Something in the order of a challenge of time. Whole communities have gone to the point of putting their lives on the line in order to hasten the advent of the Kingdom. And since this had been promised to them at the end of time, all one had to do is to put an end to time, immediately (and personally).

The whole of history was accompanied by a millennial challenge to the temporality of history. The historical perspective which recurrently displaces the game onto the plane of a hypothetical end, had always been opposed to a fatal demand or particularity, to a fatal strategy of time which seeks to burn stages and move beyond the end. We cannot say whether either of these tendencies had significantly impacted on each other, and even in

the course of history the burning question still lingers: should we or should we not wait? Ever since the messianic convulsion of the first Christians and beyond the heresies and revolts, there had always been this anticipation of the end, ultimately through death, through a seductive suicide aimed at turning God away from history and making him face his responsibilities pertaining to beyond the end, to fulfilment. What in fact is terrorism if not its own means of conjuring up the end of history? It lures power into a trap by way of an immediate and total act. Instead of waiting for a final date of reckoning, it positions itself vis-a-vis an ecstatic end in the hope of inciting or spurring conditions for Judgement day. An illusory challenge, of course, always fascinating nevertheless because, in a rather profound sense, neither time nor history were ever accepted or embraced. Everyone remains conscious of the arbitrary or artificial character of time and history. And we are never the dupes of those who would have us hope.

Isn't there outside the confines of terrorism a glimmer of this demand for a *parousia* in the global fantasy of a catastrophe that hovers over today's world? The demand for a violent resolution to reality when this reality, in fact, eludes us endlessly in a hyperreality? Hyperreality's achievement is its obliteration of a reckoning, of a Judgement Day, of an Apocalypse or of a Revolution. All these discussions of the end escape us and history doesn't stand a chance to implement them because they will have already attained their end in the meantime (it is still the story of Kafka's Messiah: he arrives too late, one day too late, and this time-lag, this discrepancy becomes unbearable). To the extent that we short-circuit the Messiah, we will crank up the end. This has always been the nature of demonic temptation: to falsify ends and all calculation with respect to these ends, to falsify time and the occurrence of things and thereby precipitate our tendency towards impatience with respect to fulfilment. Or, to secretly intuit that the promise of fulfilment itself, too, is false and diabolic.

It is via our obsession with real time, with the instantaneity of information that a corresponding secret of a millennium arises: to do away with duration (*duree*), with differential time, to annul the somewhere else of the event, to anticipate its end by exempting it from linear time, to seize upon things even before they have taken place. In this respect, real time is an even greater artifice than differential time, whilst it also involves its denial - if we want immediate satisfaction (*jouissance*) from an event, if we want to live it in the moment as if we were already there, it is because we no longer have any trust in the meaning or purpose of the event. One can spot the same denial in apparently opposite attitudes - in the historicization, in the archiving, in the memorizing of everything related to our past as well as those appertaining to every other culture. Isn't this the symptom of a collective premonition (*pressentiment*) of the end, i.e., that with this we will have arrived at the end of the event and of live historical time, and that one needs to arm oneself with all forms of artificial memory, with all the signs of the past in order to confront the absence of the future and the ice age (*temps glaciaires*) that awaits us? Aren't the mental and intellectual structures in the process of burying and shrouding themselves in memories, in archives as they lay in quest of an unlikely resurrection? All thought, all ideas will bury themselves with the prudence of the Year 2000. They can already smell the whiff of terror of the Year 2000. They instinctively adopt the solution of these cryogenics that one drops in liquid nitrogen and whereby one expects to have found the means of their survival.

These societies that no longer expect anything from a future succession of things and have less and less faith in history, societies that bury themselves in the backdrop of their futurological (*prospectives*) technologies, behind their stockpiles of information and in the cellular networks of communication and where time is finally obliterated in pure circulation - these generations may indeed never wake up, yet not be aware of it. Year 2000 may well not take place - of which they know nothing.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Pataphysics of Year 2000." *Galilee: Paris, 1992.*
Available: <http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/pataphysics.html>

